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AUTHOR Napoli, Philip M.; Powers, Gerald
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ABSTRACT

Public relations writing curricula must accurately reflect the writing responsibilities of public relations (PR) practitioners. This study provides descriptive information on the types of writing tasks conducted by PR practitioners. The study also investigates whether the type of writing and overall time spent writing vary with years of experience. Survey results from 200 public relations practitioners indicate that, for the most part, the nature and quantity of writing tasks does not vary substantially with years of experience. The percentage of the day spent writing, however, does decline with experience, indicating that higher levels of writing efficiency come with writing experience. Findings suggest that curriculum emphasis needs to be configured to reflect the prominence of pitch letter writing, news story writing, and basic letter and memo writing. (Contains four tables of data and 13 references.) (Author/CR)

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The Writing Activities of Public Relations Professionals: An Assessment for Curriculum Design and Adjustment

by

Philip M. Napoli

pnapoli@bu.edu

617-353-5004

and

Gerald Powers

gpowers@bu.edu

617-353-3497

Boston University

College of Communication

640 Commonwealth Ave.

Boston, MA 02215

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Abstract

Public relations writing curricula must accurately reflect the writing responsibilities of public relations practitioners. This study provides descriptive information on the types of writing tasks conducted by PR practitioners. The study also investigates whether the type of writing and overall time spent writing vary with years of experience. Survey results from 200 public relations practitioners indicate that, for the most part, the nature and quantity of writing tasks does not vary substantially with years of experience. However, the percentage of the day spent writing does decline with experience, indicating that higher levels of writing efficiency come with writing experience.

The Writing Activities of Public Relations Professionals: An Assessment for Curriculum Design and Adjustment

Today, there is little question as to the importance of writing skills in the workplace. Strong writing skills have been linked with overall job performance (Austin & Ventura, 1985; Quible, 1991; Sides, 1992; Storms, 1983, p. 15), professional advancement (Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 565; Storms, 1983, p. 15), and improved employment opportunities (Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 565). Research indicates that poor writing is widely considered a serious problem in the workplace (Faigley, et al., 1981, p. 31; Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 564), while the amount of time the average worker spends writing is quite substantial. College graduates spend an average of 23 percent of their work time writing (Faigley & Miller, 1982, p. 560), while business school graduates spend an average of 25 percent of their workday writing (Storms, 1983, p. 14).

The importance of strong writing skills is even more pronounced within the public relations profession. Research by Johnson (1993) found that of the 18 skills that public relations practitioners sought in new employees, communication and writing skills were ranked the highest (p. 7). Similarly, in a study by Wakefield and Cottone (1985), in which high-ranking public relations executives assessed the importance of 38 distinct knowledge and skill areas for PR professionals, writing skills

occupied three of the top five positions (p. 10). Yet poor writing has been cited by public relations professionals as the biggest weakness of people entering the field (Baxter, 1986, p. 9).

Obviously, training students to write effectively needs to be one of the highest priorities of university public relations programs. PR practitioners have identified a greater emphasis on writing as the single most important change needing to take place in public relations education (Kalupa & Allen, 1982, pp. 38-39). Clearly, the teaching of writing skills must not rest entirely with university English departments, as it has in the past (Harrison, 1989, p. 42).

This is particularly true for public relations students, given the diversity of writing types in which they must be competent (Pearson, 1987). According to Harrison (1989), public relations students must be competent in news writing, speech writing, financial writing, copywriting, and promotional writing (pp. 42-43). A survey conducted by Detweiler (1980) provides further evidence of the diversity of writing styles required of PR practitioners. Public relations faculty identified twelve different types of writing in which PR students should have significant experience before graduation. According to Detweiler (1980):

Practitioners can not concentrate in one writing framework

> as their counterparts in journalism, broadcasting and advertising. They require a background in editing, graphics, planning, campaigning, special events, public opinion and evaluation that far transcends the complexity of communication skills required by the newsperson. (p. 18)

Such diversity poses serious challenges for the design of a public relations writing curriculum that effectively prepares students for writing in the workplace. It is particularly important for the public relations writing curriculum to accurately reflect the prominence in the workplace of various writing types. Such curriculum decisions can not rest purely on the professional experience of individual faculty members, given the possibility that their experience is atypical. Faculty members may only be familiar with the writing activities of professionals with a substantial number of years of public relations experience. The writing activities of lower level practitioners may differ significantly. In addition, the ever-changing nature of the public relations field requires that writing curriculum decisions be based on direct contact with active practitioners.

These issues led to the following three research questions:

Research Question #1: What types of writing tasks do public relations practitioners engage in most frequently?

Research Question #2: Does the type of writing engaged in by public relations practitioners vary according to years of experience in the profession?

Research Question #3: Does the amount of time that public relations professionals spend writing vary according to years of experience in the profession?

Answering these questions should aid in the design and adjustment of public relations writing curricula.

Method

These research questions were investigated through a telephone survey of public relations practitioners in the New York/New England area. A sample of active public relations practitioners was generated using the 1996 Public Relations Society of America Membership Directory. Practitioners from New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine were included in the initial sampling frame. Members listed as non-practicing, university affiliated, or freelancers were removed from the list. This left a sampling frame of 1,872 names. Names were randomly selected from this list until 200 interviews were completed. The response rate was 80%.

The survey was administered between February and April of

1996. Trained telephone interviewers at the Communication Research Center at Boston University's College of Communication conducted the interviews. The questionnaire asked respondents to provide information on the percentage of the typical workday they spend writing, organization size, and years of experience in public relations.

In addition, respondents were asked to provide estimates of how many times in a typical month they completed each of the following 14 different writing tasks: (1) office memos; (2) pitch letters; (3) general letters; (4) media alerts (letters inviting the media to a special event); (5) activity summaries/status reports; (6) news releases; (7) news stories; (8) bulleted talking points; (9) speeches; (10) feature articles; (11) photo captions; (12) biographical sketches; (13) press kits; and (14) public service announcements (PSAs).

Results

Descriptive information is provided in Table 1. As the table indicates, the respondents had an average of over 13 years of public relations experience, ranging from two years to 40 years. In addition, the respondents reported spending an average of 40% of their typical workday on writing tasks. This average is substantially higher than the 23% reported for college graduates as a whole and the 25% reported for business school graduates.

Insert Table 1 Here

Table 2 provides descriptive information for each of 14 writing types. Memos (average of 37 per month) and letters (20 per month) were by far the most common writing activities. High frequency levels were also reported for pitch letters (7 per month) and news stories (6.5 per month), followed by news releases, with 6.3 per month. At the low end of the spectrum were public service announcements and speeches (both with an average of less than one per month), as well as biographies and features (both with an average of about 1.5 per month).

Insert Table 2 Here

These means provide a useful tool for assessing current public relations writing curricula in order to determine whether they accurately reflect the prevalence of different writing tasks within the professional arena.

Another question this study sought to investigate was whether the type of writing engaged in by public relations practitioners varies according to years of experience. Table 3 reports the correlations between each of the 14 writing types and years of experience in public relations.

Insert Table 3 Here

Note that the only significant correlations occurred for press kits and for letters. For press kits ($r = -.19$, $p < .05$), the results indicate that they are more likely to be the task of less experienced employees, whereas the number of letters written is positively correlated with years of experience ($r = .22$, $p < .01$). For the remainder of the writing types, however, the quantity of writing tasks completed in an average month is unrelated to years of experience.

Regarding research question number three, the negative correlation between years of experience and time spent writing implies that while the quantity of writing tasks is unrelated to years of experience, the time required to complete these tasks decreases ($r = -.27$, $p = .00$). Thus, though the amount of writing stays relatively constant across a PR professional's career, experience obviously leads to greater levels of writing efficiency.

This conclusion is supported by the analysis reported in Table 4. For this analysis, years of experience was collapsed into four categories: (1) 0-6.9 years; (2) 7-11.9 years; (3) 12-19.9 years; and (4) 20-40 years. The number of cases in each of these categories is roughly equivalent, ranging from 47 to 52.

Insert Table 4 Here

An analysis of variance indicates that the average time spent writing drops to 32 percent of the average workday for public relations practitioners with over twenty years of experience, compared with 48 percent for practitioners with less than seven years of experience and means of 40 percent and 41 percent for practitioners in the mid-range experience categories. These differences are significant at the .05 level.

ANOVAs for each writing type indicate no significant differences between experience categories, with the exception of general letters. For letters, the average is approximately 14 per month for practitioners with less than seven years of experience. This number jumps to almost 28 for practitioners with 20 or more years of experience. Note also, however, that the mean number of press kits produced by employees with less than twelve years of experience is over five, while the mean drops to less than one for practitioners in the 12 to 19 and 20-plus years experience categories. However, this distribution did not achieve statistical significance at the .05 level. Similarly, there is a substantial difference between highly experienced and less experienced practitioners in terms of news story and memo writing; however, these differences were not

significant at the .05 level. These nonsignificant results can be attributed to extremely high levels of within-group variation. In sum, the mean number of writing tasks for each category remains relatively constant across experience levels, while the time required to complete these tasks decreases with experience.

Conclusions

Writing is obviously a central activity for public relations practitioners across all levels of experience. It is not an entry level activity that diminishes in prominence as a PR practitioner progresses through his or her career. Nor is it an activity that entry-level practitioners must work up to. Writing maintains a consistent presence throughout the PR professional's career. While the efficiency born of experience clearly decreases the percentage of the workday spent on writing, the distribution of writing tasks remains relatively constant across levels of experience. Only press kit writing appears uniquely characteristic of early career writing, while letter writing is the only writing type that we can effectively associate with upper-level practitioners. These results clearly suggest that public relations programs need not offer radically different writing curricula at the undergraduate and graduate levels (if indeed the graduate program is oriented toward training non-entry level practitioners).

The results presented here that describe the prevalence of

each individual writing type should be useful in the assessment and design of departmental public relations writing curricula. A curriculum that focuses intensively on speech writing, public service announcements, or feature writing clearly needs to reconfigure its emphasis in order to reflect the prominence of pitch letter writing, news story writing, and basic letter and memo writing. Workplace assessments such as the one presented here need to be conducted on a regular basis in order to insure that public relations writing curricula continually reflect the realities of professional public relations writing.

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Table 1: Mean years of PR experience and % of day spent writing.

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
Years of PR experience	13.63	2	2	40
% of day spent writing	40.27	20	5	90

Table 2: Mean number of tasks completed in average month.

Writing Type	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max
PSA	.82	2.7	0	30
Speeches	.88	3.3	0	40
Biographies	1.5	2.1	0	12
Features	1.6	2.8	0	20
Talking points	2.7	4.5	0	35
Press kits	3.1	11	0	100
Media alerts	3.3	4.8	0	40
Activity summaries	3.8	4.9	0	40
Photo captions	5.0	8.9	0	72
News releases	6.3	7.8	0	60
News stories	6.5	44.4	0	600
Pitch letters	6.8	15.8	0	180
Letters	19.8	21.5	0	150
Memos	36.7	57.1	0	400

Table 3: Correlations with years of experience.

Variable	Pearson's r
PSA	-.03
Speeches	-.06
Biographies	-.05
Features	.05
Talking points	-.05
Press kits	-.19*
Media alerts	.02
Activity summaries	.10
Photo captions	.09
News releases	-.05
News stories	.09
Pitch letters	.01
Letters	.22**
Memos	.11
% of day spent writing	-.27**

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Table 4: Analysis of variance by years of experience

	Group Means by Years of Experience			
Variable	0-6.9	7-11.9	12-19.9	20+
PSA	.98	.83	.84	.67
Speeches	.85	1.8	.38	.54
Biographies	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.2
Features	1.0	1.6	2.0	1.7
Talking points	3.3	2.5	3.1	2.1
Press kits	5.1	5.4	.91	.92
Media alerts	3.2	3.3	3.0	3.6
Activity summaries	3.4	3.5	3.5	4.8
Photo captions	4.3	5.1	4.5	6.0
News releases	6.8	6.9	5.4	6.4
News stories	2.4	4.7	3.1	15.3
Pitch letters	5.5	9.2	5.7	7.1
Letters*	13.6	19.1	18.3	27.5
Memos	29.6	36.9	34.3	45.9
% Day spent writing**	47.9	40.3	41.2	32.1

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$